

Rev. Jonathan R Thomas

Oct. 4, 2015 – St. Francis (B)

Gal. 6:14-18, Matt. 11:25-30

In the Footsteps of St. Francis

While it has been a good week for celebration at St. Paul's with the bishop's joining us to celebrate new ministry here and the wonderful event of the blessing of the animals yesterday, in the greater community and world there has been more cause for concern than for celebration. Broadly speaking, it has been a rough week for peace. There are the rumblings and rumors of war abroad, another senseless shooting in our nation, and the economic turmoil and anxiety caused by uncertain employment opportunities in our own city. Surely I am not alone in feeling burdened by the cares of these many things, both near at hand and far abroad. That is why I could think of no better passage for a gospel reading today, no better words to epitomize "good news," than, "come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest." Thank you Lord Jesus. That is the reassurance that we needed this morning.

I love this verse. We use it to comfort people in all sorts of difficult situations for obvious reasons. But as much as I would like to read it that way, Jesus is not here promising an absolute end to these burdens. He does not, in fact, call on us to lay our burdens down completely and walk away. Instead Jesus calls us to walk with him, be bound to him, allow him to carry the bulk of the load, but still to put on the yoke and have a part in the work. He says, my yoke is easy and my burden light. But this implies that in going with Jesus there is a burden nonetheless.

Today's passages are the St. Francis day readings. And while we could say many things about Francis' life - it was inspiring, beautiful, memorable, praiseworthy - carefree is not something we would include in the list. We learn in his story that a life of following Jesus comes with a yoke; it has its own burden. It is no doubt easier and lighter than carrying the chaos of the world. That is why the weary young Francis renounces his father's expectations, his worldly ambitions, and much more just to get out from under the weight of those concerns that had great burden but no real or eternal purpose. But in their place he takes on the work of Jesus, being the instrument of God's intent for the world. He cared for the needy wherever he found them, healed the broken landscape of creation, restored what had been torn down or fallen into negligent disrepair, and did the difficult work of creating the space for fighting people to have a conversation that might lead to peace. And through it he lightened his own load, taking on tasks while throwing off cares.

See, being yoked to Christ means that you do not have to do all the pulling. There is work, but the one, in this scenario, doing the lion's share of the work is Jesus himself. But you must still keep up, because he is indeed working and if you fall behind or try to veer off you will be dragged along. Jesus has work to do in the world and he is looking for those join him, those disciples willing to lay down the heavy concerns of their own lives with which they are loaded down, and instead carry on the work of making the how world lighter, brighter, and more peaceful. Jesus is actively redeeming the world and calling us to participate in order to bring

peace, not only to our world but to our lives. But you should be warned that joining in this work will leave a mark on you.

In the first reading the writer says that he carries the marks of Christ branded in his body. Stigmata is the word in Greek used here. This passage is where that idea comes from. I don't know whether some saints like Francis really carried stigmata as signs of their unity with Christ in their own bodies or not. That sort of thing has never interested me a bit. But I do know that each of you carries the mark of Christ on your body. I know because when we baptize someone we take out the special chrism oil and make the sign of the cross on their forehead, Jesus' sign, and say the words, "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever." And for the rest of your life and beyond you bear the mark of Christ in your body - that's what forever means. You have been marked for this work, and there is no chance of peace in your life without engaging in it. Saints are just ordinary people who give their lives to do God's will in the world.

If we want to follow the path of Francis we will become instruments of peace. Peace is more like a garden - it has to be constantly tended or it will grow weeds and be overrun. It takes consistent work to create some harmony. Sitting in your house hoping and praying for a lush, beautiful, vibrant garden with no weeds isn't going to get you that. It isn't going to get us peace either. It takes hard work and intentional steps in following Jesus. It takes things like interfaith dialogue to foster understanding. It takes offering a safe place in our community to have an important conversation about rising gun violence. It takes a commitment to caring for people who get laid off from work. And much more. This is the work you will do if you allow yourself to be yoked to Christ, but the harvest you will reap will be peace, not only in your community but in your own soul. As you set out to do God's work, in the benediction of Galatians, "may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters." Amen.